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FROM ORALITY TO PRINT TO DIGITAL LITERATURE: ANALYZING THE THIRD AGE LITERARY NARRATIVE

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Abstract

This paper is a study of the Third Age in the evolution of literary narratives that has opened immense new possibilities in an unprecedented way. Digital literature has emerged as a literature of circularity and potential- a highly malleable and potent mode that amalgamates characteristics of both print and oral literary cultures. It is also with this emergence that an alternate discourse has emerged. Language as used in the virtual realm has evolved with new coinages, innovations with linguistic structures and alternative uses of language in popular discourse in the virtual world. This paper shall take a closer look at the politics of authorship which takes an unconventional twist especially in the case of hypertext novels, and also explore what happens to the economics of writing and publishing in this virtual market of literature.

This paper endeavors to explore the dynamics of digital literature and its readership; digital art and its relationship with society, albeit a limited, virtual society. This study shall reveal how the process of evolution has led to the modification and adaptation of orality and print culture into this Third Dimension in the post modern world. As the concept note of the conference explicates, the three ages are not exclusive of each other, but rather, exist simultaneously, their elements surviving in each other as well as independently. Lastly, this paper shall also briefly look at possibilities in future that could take literary narratives to yet more new and experimental dimensions. I would like to begin with a brief anecdote about the conception of the idea behind this paper. Two very different experiences of being audience to narratives struck me with their surprising similarities. The first was that of a Dastaangoi

session, the ageless tradition of oral storytelling, where two Dastaangohs narrated a Rajasthani folktale called 'Chouboli'. The other experience was that of reading Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, A Story*, a virtual interactive novel which is a genre of web fiction launched a little over two decades ago, and I seemed to be the author as well as the reader of this story at the same time. These two narratives shared not just structural similarities but also invited a similar reaction and interaction from me as a reader/audience. This led me to explore the evolution of narratives from orality to written/print literature and finally to this Third Age of narratives- digital or electronic literature. Digital literature has emerged as a literature of circularity and potential- a highly malleable and potent mode that amalgamates characteristics of both print and oral literary cultures- its narrative strategies are strongly reminiscent of pre-print traditions such as folklore, while its format uses the written word, along with its codified regulations in the form of copyrights and cyber laws. This paper will be divided roughly into three segments, the first is a discussion of different kinds of narratives and genres of Digital literature, which will help give context to the discussion which will follow, the second is a study of Interactive novels in particular, to see how they build upon oral and print narratives in terms of technique, narration/presentation, interactivity and the politics of authorship. The third segment will be an enquiry into the concerns of virtual audiences and the possibilities of what lies beyond the digital age. The story of digital literature begins in the mid 1980s when digital publishing entered the market of print literature. The development of digital text processing devices altered not only production but writing itself, because typing on computers enabled the text to proceed as almost as fast as thought. Editing here became much quicker, easier and cheaper than in the use of traditional typewriters and printing techniques. Digital publishing opened new avenues to support marginal and experimental literatures. Apart from digitalized print literature and digitally published literature, Hypertext Literature is the mode that used the didgital format and its techniques, and launched the Third Dimension of narratives in the true sense. The concept of associative writing began with a device called Memex, which was created by the American engineer Vannevar Bush, now hailed as the father of Hypertext literature. Memex is an adjustable micro-film viewer similar to the World Wide Web. Bush envisioned a large database linking different networks. The author would create a document with a link structure which a reader could access and follow the chain of links with which it was created. In effect, the reader had access to the procedures by which the author created the text, thereby becoming a participant in the 'building' of the text. The next important marker in the

trajectory of digital literature was the launch of the software called Storyspace by the company Eastgate Systems, in 1987. Storyspace was designed for creating, editing and reading hypertext fiction, and it involved audience participation in the unfolding of the text. Its first product was the Interactive Novel *Afternoon, A Story*, written by Michael Joyce, which will be discussed shortly. It is important to note at this point that forms like the interactive novel are designed to play with human intellect in its individual capacity, in much the same way as the advent of the novel first conceived of the 'individual reader'. Another program which works in a similar fashion is the chatterbot or the chatter robot. Chatterbots are text based conversation agents which chat with human users or are used for specific purposes like helpline services. These programs are also called Artificial Conversational Entities, because they are designed to appear like human entities with voices, though they are entirely computer generated. On the other hand are the simultaneously developed programs like text based adventure games, which used Multi User Domains- a format where multiple users are connected by an interface and are able to interact with each other. These games offer several paths to the player to proceed through, in order to solve riddles. Web comics, hypertext poetry and networked literature operate in an open web environment like a chat room. The narrative (i.e. the comic strip or the story) is started by the author but its course is determined by the readers' votes. Based upon the feedback of the reader, which is crucial to the progress of the narrative, the author updates the story regularly on the web. In this process, the author may choose to change parts of the narrative, or even delete parts of it. An example could be Finnish author Markku Eskelinens novel Interface, which began as a print novel and thereafter continued online, propelled by readers' response, making it literally a 'living text'. This category of 'narratives' aims at mental cooperation between several minds to continue the narrative, develop an idea and build up a narrative. In contrast to single reader/audience based programs, this category functions in a collective audience who actively interact among themselves as well as with the author, functioning on the same principle as that of community based oral storytelling. Having established these two kinds of programs in digital literature, I shall now focus on Interactive Novels to explore how the reader-text dynamics function here in comparison to oral and print narratives. In terms of Narration, or the presentation of the narrative, interactive novels work in a peculiar way. For the purpose of study, Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, A Story* is a good example to work with. This novel was published in 1990 and it used the software Storyspace, which has been mentioned before. This novel has a basic beginning and a single frame story can be figured

out. But the story can proceed in several ways through 'nodes' or hyperlinked words/phrases. The reader can choose to jump into random links and navigate the novel like a maze and find his/her way around. The alternative to this is to follow a 'default path' provided by the author/program which can direct the reader to a simpler path, which leaves out many sub plots, and even details like the name of the protagonist. The important point is, none of these paths are chronological and neither do the links indicate any clear time shifts. Departures from any given temporal/spatial position are unmarked. There are only phrases like "I made a call", "Do you want to hear about it", "I want to say" which can be clicked on and a new link can be reached. These links (called lexia- term given by Barthes) could hold texts or images or both, or in certain cases like the hypernovel *Califia*, use audio-visual material along with the text. The lone, unequipped reader can choose to wander into these terrains, but someone who opts for the default path can always return to the main path with the 'return' button. This phenomenon finds precedents in oral performances, as discussed by Walter J.Ong in his book *Orality and Literacy*. Ong describes the position of the oral performer who encounters distractions where certain words set off a chain of associations which the narrator follows into a *cul de sac* from which only a skilled narrator can extricate himself. In an oral narration, corrections have to be minimal in order to keep the audience convinced and in tune with the narrator. The ability to correct himself gracefully is not merely about bricolage or handiwork or clever improvisations, because oral organization is unlike 'literate organization'. Subtle connections have to be negotiated by the bard and these are a part of his art. Ong hits the nail on the head by saying that "Bricolage is the literate's term for what he himself would be guilty of if he produced an oral-styled poem."(29) While for the oral performer, the spoken word could not be changed but 'patched over' (which Levi Strauss terms as bricolage characteristic of 'primitive' thought patterns) or at the most be denied, the written word on the other hand, could be later altered or corrected. In the case of Hypertext literature, however, the digressions or off-path connections are made not by the teller but the reader/author of the story. The 'return' is here possible with the click of a button, but strikingly similar to the bard, 'random' events are part of the puzzle which the reader can navigate to discover new details and flesh out the text. Narration is basically a verbal art, and in primary orality it served the purpose of organizing and preserving knowledge into stories over centuries. While in the written/printed form, the text binds the content, any part of which can be retrieved at will, in case of the oral narrative, it is the narrative alone that has to bind the thought process and preserve it. Repetition here functioned like a 'node' that would

facilitate memorization and thereby, the durability of the story. In hypernovels too, repetition figures significantly- if the reader reaches a node through various paths, the same node can be repeated and yet mean different things each time. The repetition might disorient readers but it also helps trace patterns and derive diverse interpretations. In terms of Interactivity, reader response studies have emphasized how a reader is always a participant in the process of signification by the process of interpretation. Hypernovels take reader response theory to another level altogether, insofar as it enables the reader to literally navigate the text, determine its flow and thus rewrite it, though the 'rewriting' comes with its own limitations, which will be discussed in the next segment of this paper. In order to analyze interactivity better, it would be useful at this point to look at location of the teller/author and the audience/reader and the narrative technique that acts as the interface between them. Walter J.Ong traces narrative techniques in written literature from early writing that recorded philosophical arguments in dialogues spoken by two or more characters (the simplest example being Plato's writings). Following it were the Medieval objection-response format or the 'dialectical reasoning' of Scholasticism. With Boccaccio and Chaucer, the frame story of characters telling stories to each other became a tool to conceptualize an audience in a written text. Written, and later printed, texts visualized an audience which was fictionalized and expected to read and understand the text in a certain way. By the time the novel appeared on the scene, the unidentified reader could at the most be addressed as the "reader" in a self-reassuring gesture, as done in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. In contrast to the very real audience of the oral narrative who lives it as an experience, the written word functions in its own paradox. Ong points out how the deadness or frigidity and fixity also assure the endurance of the written word. Dissociated from the living context, the text is nevertheless a latent possibility- the potential for being "resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers"(67). Due to the mass production and greater legibility, print brought not only the private ownership of words and solo reading but also endless scope for re-writing the text. As far as plots are concerned, hypertext is a remarkable literal manifestation of the plot of oral tales and epics. While typographical plots are linear- they build up the action, reach a climactic point, the reversal of action (peripeteia) and then the denouement- the oral narrative operates in the *medias res.* The reader is thrown into the action, then the events are gradually explained. The epic poet has a plot in mind but deliberately dismembers and reshuffles parts of the plot to later reassemble it in a contrived pattern. This ploy is used more out of necessity because the wide repertoire of stories could

not be chronologically arranged in the act of telling. Bards were also influenced by topical situations, demands of the current audience and his interaction with the listeners. Improvisations are necessary but also very temporary because the bard may never return to the same set of audience again. The bard thus navigates the non-linear, or infact, a multi-linear narrative, due to the ‘play’ of the literal supplementarity of links much as the reader of hypertext fiction who switches between blocks of text, images, audio and videographic material.

Beyond the analyses of the form and its technical dynamics, the political, social and ideological implications of narrativising in the virtual realm are many. For one thing, the ever-changing, fluid format of the hypernovel defies the system of canonization and the establishment of any ‘river of great tradition’ because there is no static text, let alone a singular omnipotent, omniscient author/narrator. The hypernovel itself is always in the process of becoming much like traditional texts, except that the process of evolution of the text is speeded up exponentially here. Concerns of the phasing out of books and written literature have also arisen, but hypertext fiction is part of a post-textual literature. The nature of literature changes, it is redefined, and reformulated to include a range of multimedia devices. It renders post-literacy obsolete, much as print rendered memory obsolete when memory was the principle on which orality functioned. In the switch from orality to print, an external resource was invested with what had previously been preserved by internal resources namely the mental faculties. Also, by erasing the strictly polarized binary of reader and author, hypertext broadens authorship, simultaneous to readership. It is imperative at this point, however, to unravel and deconstruct the notion of the author-reader. When the lexia exist in the software, albeit as a potentiality without the need for an author, it assumes an existence of its own- the art dissociated from the artist. But does this writing really exist independent any human authorship? It can be argued that the lexia are set by an author/creator too. Human imagination and creativity cannot break the mould of constricted and time bound spaces like the 140 character tweet and carefully timed virtual games. Therefore, a hierarchy of authors becomes visible- the master weaver of narrative who proffers different threads to infinite number of authors. This idea is reminiscent of folktales and their characters whose authors are untraceable, but which have been employed in endless narratives through the ages. Away from this romanticized idea, I am forced to think of the software giants who are probably the Homers of whom I talk. Microsoft, Eastgate and other such companies control and orchestrate the drama of creation and consumption of digital

literature. The mirage is demystified when one thinks of the invisible hegemony operating behind the structure which also holds the ultimate power to silence and erase the virtual voice at will. It is a fact that the moment a thought ensconced in word enters writing, printing or the virtual world, the process of censorship begins- at first subconsciously and internally, then through external forces. With the effacement of orality and its spontaneity, the analytical reflectiveness of the visible word changed the nature of narratives. Lastly, there is also the question of the position of the reader and the author. It is not just the authorial voice that is destabilized, but the very 'self' of the author is hard to locate and determine. The virtual realm is a giant labyrinth of pseudonyms, anonymous creators and virtual avatars. Does the author then have a self or a body or is he/she assimilated into the machine? On the other hand, when the hypertext has no closure, how does one define the product of the virtual market? Interactive novels are sold online as interactive kits, which do not hold conclusive narratives. The consumer is neither the audience nor the reader, but a partner in the production, working for a no-profit no-loss venture. One must also remember that the virtual economy works with a paradox. Digital literature might be hailed as revolutionary and liberating, but only for a limited, computer-literate populace. Tailored books for customers are ordered in various formats. But at the other end of the spectrum ventures like Writer's Workshop based in Kolkata, continues to exist in the market of literature. The simultaneity of existence of orality alongside virtual and print cultures continues.

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